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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how learners can work on problems involved in learning a foreign language on their own through reading strategies and the help of a well-stocked, language resources center. Using this self-access approach and the resources center, the learner can accomplish the goal of learning with only minimal assistance from other learners or a language learning adviser. It is suggested that learning materials be developed for language development as well as for reading skills development. Approaches that have been found useful for language learning through reading and for reading skills, in particular, are reviewed, such as extensive reading, intensive reading, skimming, scanning, and summarizing. The impact of reading speed on student learning is also discussed. (Contains 22 references.) (NAV)

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George Blue

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Reading in a Foreign Language: A Self-Access Approach

George Blue

In recent years there has been a great deal of interest in learner-centred activities in language learning. The terms "self-directed language learning", "self-instruction", "learner independence", "individualisation" and "self-access" have come to be very widely used (and abused) and "self-access" in particular has come to be associated with student resources centres. Just as "self-service" in the culinary field is taken to mean that diners can take their choice from a range of dishes on offer, so "self-access" in the pedagogic field implies that learners can take their choice from a range of learning materials on offer. There can be no better place in which to do this than a resources centre. And just as the chef or waiter may advise on the choice of dishes but would not dream of making the choice for the diner (unless specifically requested to do so), so the teacher / tutor / helper / consultant / adviser may advise on the choice of learning materials but would not normally be expected to make the choice for the learner (unless specifically requested to do so). "Self-access" implies that the learning materials should be readily available for the learner to choose from, with user-friendly cataloguing systems, open-access shelves, etc. They would not normally be issued or directly controlled by the teacher, although of course the teacher may make recommendations, sometimes even strong recommendations.

Sometimes, of course, resources centres will be used by a class working with a teacher. There may be cases where the teacher would wish to remain in control of all the different activities, directing each learner to the materials or activities that are thought to be most suitable for that particular learner. This is certainly a form of individualisation that may go quite a long way towards meeting the individual needs of the learners, but the independence of the learner is somewhat restricted and it is arguable that such an approach is not making full use of the resources centre. Learners may feel frustrated, being surrounded by all sorts of interesting language learning materials but not having the opportunity to explore them or select from them. Adult learners in particular may find

that such an approach does not motivate them to learn, especially if their own perception of their needs and interests does not fully coincide with the teacher's. Although there are always exceptions, a better solution would normally be for the learner to take the responsibility for selecting the materials, with the teacher/ adviser giving advice when requested or when it is seen to be necessary.

Thus, the setting up of a resources centre probably implies a commitment to self-directed language learning. Whilst this should not mean that learners will be left entirely to their own devices (the role of the language learning adviser being, to my mind, central to the operation of such a centre) it does mean that the majority if not all of the learning materials supplied should be suitable for learners to use on their own, without having to refer constantly to an adviser. Dickinson (1987) gives a useful list of "specific design features" for all self-instructional materials, explaining that the materials themselves should as far as possible "contain the help and information which a teacher would supply", whilst Chaix et al. (1978) discuss the criteria which make for successful self-access materials in some detail, under the general headings of "degree of autonomy", "degree of individualisation", "practicability", and "suitability" of materials.

It may be quite difficult to produce materials which meet these criteria for the productive skills of speaking and writing, since the communicative use of language is open-ended and is therefore difficult to predict accurately or to monitor. However, it should be much more manageable for the receptive skills of listening and reading. Even listening has the disadvantage that slowing down the speed of delivery may distort the message or render it inauthentic, whereas reading has the advantage that it can proceed at different speeds, although Smith (1985) has suggested that reading too slowly causes tunnel vision, which reduces the chances of comprehension. If we pay too much attention to each letter or even each word, it may be difficult to retain the individual words in the short-term memory long enough to build meaningful relationships between words. However, there are possibilities for slowing down reading speed and there is of course no limit to the number of times a text can be read and re-read. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate the potential of self-access

materials for reading in a foreign language, bearing in mind that these should be just about the easiest kind of self-access materials to produce and to use effectively.

My deliberate attempt to focus on this one skill should not be taken to imply that it is impossible to develop the other language skills in a self-directed mode, although I have suggested that it may be more difficult, particularly for the productive skills. Nor do I necessarily wish to suggest that it is a good thing to concentrate on one skill at the expense of all the others. There may be occasions when this is appropriate (e.g. the agricultural extension worker in Thailand who needs English in order to read about developments in agriculture but who is unlikely to want to use English productively or even to understand the spoken language; the scholar who needs to read Latin texts but who is unlikely to need any of the other language skills in Latin), but most learners will require and certainly will desire a more balanced approach to the language skills.

It is in any case open to question whether it is possible to learn one language skill without at the same time improving one's ability in the other skills. Krashen (1984) has claimed that extensive reading automatically gives rise to competence in writing, although this is almost certainly an overstatement of the case, as there are many examples of proficient readers in a foreign language (and even in their native language) whose writing skills remain quite rudimentary. To my mind, Krashen seriously underestimates the importance of developing what he calls "composing processes", which can best be done by paying conscious attention to the many different facets of writing and which may include the intensive study of written texts. Nevertheless, it is likely that in focusing on the reading skill one is not only developing this skill but also learning the language, and the language learnt will presumably in most cases be available for use in listening, speaking and writing.

This brings us to an interesting question which has received considerable attention in recent years (e.g. Nuttall 1982; Gremmo 1985): Is the use of a written text for the purposes of language improvement an "authentic" use of the text, or should we rather be using written texts for extracting

meaning and developing reading skills? The same question viewed through the eyes of the learner or foreign language user has been addressed by Alderson (1984): Are difficulties encountered in reading in a foreign language due primarily to inadequate language competence or to inadequate reading skills? Although the empirical evidence is still rather scarce, it seems, as might be expected, that foreign language learners do in fact face both of these problems when reading in the foreign language. Consequently, I would wish to argue that learning materials should be devised both for language development and for reading skills development. In fact, it is sometimes difficult to retain a rigid distinction between the two, and many learning materials may be useful for both. In the remainder of this paper we shall consider some of the approaches that might be suitable for both language learning through reading and developing reading skills.

Developing language skills through reading

First of all, there can be no doubt that extensive reading can be an extremely effective means of gaining exposure to language, which can be not only a source of pleasure but also a source of language development. The reader's focus will normally be on meaning rather that form, and the language acquisition that takes place will therefore be largely unconscious and will tend towards fluency rather than accuracy development. This kind of reading can help to familiarise readers with lexical items, collocations, structures, cohesive and stylistic devices, and although these may initially only feature as part of the learner's receptive ability they may later give rise to productive language use.

Intensive reading is perhaps most commonly thought of as an excellent way of learning vocabulary, as lexical items are encountered in context and are often repeated several times in the same text. Various exercies can be devised to help master the vocabulary, and good examples are found in many textbooks. Scottetal. (1984) suggest simply writing down unfamiliar words in the text which look important and initially guessing at the meaning. However, Williams and Moran (1989) report on research which suggests that skilled readers both in L1 and L2 are incapable of guessing

more than a small proportion of words and that their preferred strategy is to ignore rather than guess the meaning of unknown lexis. If intensive reading is being undertaken with a view to developing vocabulary, it may therefore be sensible to make good use of a dictionary, which may lead on to various types of vocabulary exercise or to different methods of organising lexical items to assist learning. One simple procedure that anybody can easily adopt for themselves is to photocopy the text and, after trying to learn the meanings of unfamiliar lexical items and the contexts in which they occur, to blank out these words in the photocopy. A few days later the text with the blanks can be used as a kind of modified cloze exercise to reinforce the vocabulary learning that has taken place, and the answers can be checked against the original

Intensive reading can also be a way of concentrating on grammar, either by looking for examples of a particular syntactic structure or by simply taking a few sentences and studying the syntactic structures encountered. This is no more "authentic" a use of texts written to be read than using them for vocabulary development, but it has certain advantages over decontextualised grammar exercises. The disadvantage with this approach to grammar is that some constructions may occur only infrequently, if at all, in the texts chosen for study and that it may therefore be difficult to obtain the necessary exposure or reinforcement.

Another use to which reading passages can be put is for the study of discourse markers and cohesive devices. Again, this has been very successfully exploited by a number of textbook writers (e.g. British Council 1979). Studying the ways in which pro-forms are used in a language and the relationships within and between sentences that are implied by certain linking words can be a very fruitful exercise which can help not only with recognition but also with the production of the appropriate forms in the foreign language.

Developing reading skills through reading

As with many human skills where we learn by doing, the best way to develop reading skills is probably by reading. There can be a number of goals in reading, and a comprehensive reading development programme

will probably deal with each of these. Within a resources centre there should therefore be exercises that sensitise learners and help them to focus on each of these goals. Before we look at the goals in detail, though, it is worth mentioning that most texts lend themselves to reading for a number of different purposes, and a bank of reading passages can therefore be used in a number of different ways by different learners or by the same learners on different occasions. As producing a separate set of reading exercises for every reading passage can be extremely time-consuming, Scott et al. (1984) have devised a "standard exercise" for reading, which gives the reader a number of different goals and practises a variety of different reading strategies. One of the problems with exercises of this sort, though, is that by trying to be comprehensive they actually mitigate against replicating authentic reading purposes. In real life, readers would very rarely go through all of these stages with any one text, though they might go through most of the stages at some point in their reading of a variety of texts. Perhaps an element of choice in exercises needs to be introduced, along with a choice of texts. Scott et al. report, not surprisingly, that the standard exercise is very time-consuming, but they also claim that after students have tackled a minimum of 20 texts in this way they feel very much more confident about their ability to read authentic texts in English, and in particular about their ability to understand the "main points" of a text.

Until the mid-1970s most materials designed for teaching reading in a foreign language had as their major focus reading for detailed comprehension. This involves paying close attention to lexis and structures and may require the use of reference works, especially dictionaries. As an authentic reading exercise it certainly has some value, as there are occasions when such detailed study may be called for. However, with the dramatically increased quantity of written information that many of us now have to deal with, it is no longer a particularly common form of reading and, though it might be very useful for language learning purposes, it is probably less useful as a strategy for authentic reading in a foreign language.

In authentic reading one normally has a clear goal or purpose, which may be enjoyment of fiction, picking out interesting news items or commentaries in a newspaper, getting an idea of the main points covered by a book on applied linguistics, etc. When one is practising reading it may be useful to try and replicate these goals, and many more recent learning materials therefore include pre-reading activities, which encourage learners, among other things, to review what they already know about the subject, to predict from the title (and possibly a cursory glance at the text) what main points the passage is likely to include, and to define possible purposes for reading. This pre-reading stage may also serve to arouse interest in the topic and to increase motivation for reading by activating existing content schemata (Williams 1987). As Murtagh says in her review of the relevant research, "... good L2 readers use more information than resides in the text itself - background knowledge structures or content schemata also assist in predicting the text content".

In view of all this, it is hardly surprising that one of the strategies that learners are now encouraged to develop in a wide range of foreign language reading materials is skimming, or reading for gist. This is a strategy that can be applied to most texts, although some of course lend themselves to it more easily than others. Although it is widely practised in first language reading, it is surprisingly difficult for many learners to transfer this strategy to foreign language reading.

It may be useful for learners to observe their reading habits in their mother tongue (which of course may not always be good habits!) and to aim to emulate or improve on these when reading in a foreign language. One of the problems frequently encountered by learners practising skimming in a foreign language is that their imperfect mastery of the language reduces the number of clues available to them. This may make it more difficult to gain an overview of the meaning of the text from a limited sampling than would be the case for native speakers or for more proficient foreign language users. I do not wish to make light of these language difficulties and, as has already been mentioned, there can be a good case for developing language skills through reading. If our focus is on developing

reading skills, though, the only way to improve one's skimming technique is by practice. Learners need to be encouraged to time themselves fairly strictly and, after an appropriate length of time has elapsed, to check their overall comprehension either by a small number of specially prepared questions or by writing a very short summary of the main ideas. These can later be checked either by comparing them with model answers or by more detailed re-reading of the text.

Fry (1963) and De Leeuw and De Leeuw (1965) both give good examples of reading passages with comprehension questions which can be used for skimming practice. However, some of these passages are rather short and may therefore be lacking in the redundancy and repeated semantic clues that are so necessary for successful skimming. As Clarke and Silberstein (1979) have said, "The easiest passage is not necessarily the shortest, but rather the one which is conceptually complete".

Closely related to the strategy of skimming is that of scanning, or reading for specific information. Again, this is a strategy that most efficient readers have frequent recourse to in their mother tongue, but it is not always transferred very successfully to the foreign language. A number of published course books give practice in scanning telephone directories, tables of contents, pages of advertisements and other types of text that easily lend themselves to scanning. These offer useful practice at the intermediate level, but foreign language learners often find it difficult to progress beyond this type of material to the more advanced scanning of dense prose in search of references to a particular topic. In a foreign language it is probably more crucial to identify the key words in advance of scanning, but apart from this the best way to improve one's scanning technique is probably by practising scanning! As the readers will not be familiar with the texts in advance a few carefully prepared questions will be necessary to help in this.

Reading for study purposes or for professional purposes often involves summarising and making notes as well as simply understanding the text. Even in their native language many readers find it very difficult to rephrase the content in their own words and to keep their notes to a

manageable length. In a foreign language the problem can be compounded by lack of confidence in one's own ability to express the ideas clearly and by the feeling that one could never approach the elegance of the original writer. Something of the complexity of summary writing is described by Johns (1988). Nevertheless, there are a number of occasions when a summary couched in one's own words, and possibly with an element of evaluation, may be called for. Practice in this sort of exercise can be undertaken using almost any text of the reader's choice. It is an exercise that lends itself very easily to peer cooperation, where two learners may decide to work on the same text and then compare their summaries, possibly trying to agree on a concensus version. This can give very useful practice in identifying the most important points in a text and rejecting irrelevant or less important information. It is a very important skill for foreign language readers, many of whom find that there are occasions in their reading when they "can't see the wood for the trees" or when they suffer from a sort of "processing myopia" (Matthews 1989). Working with another learner in this way may also reduce or even eliminate the need to consult with a teacher or language learning adviser, thus helping the learners to develop their independence in language learning.

The process of summarising in one's own words is an important first stage in evaluating the text, and this brings us on to critical reading, a process which has been described in some detail by my colleagues Clare Mar-Molinero and Patrick Stevenson (1986). In some cultures the printed word is held in very high regard, having a kind of magical, almost sacred quality. For readers coming from such backgrounds it will therefore be very difficult to approach texts in a critical manner. However, readers from any background can generally be helped to understand something of the nature and function of different kinds of text, and carefully structured exercises will often bring them to the point where they can evaluate critically the content of different kinds of text (factual, persuasive, argumentative, etc.). As they develop this strategy they may be able to apply it to other texts that they read. This approach to foreign language reading may be helping learners to develop strategies that they have not previously learnt to apply when reading in their first language, and it is one of the many ways in which language learning can contribute to the general education of the learners.

Finally, a number of recent textbooks on reading in a foreign language have stressed the importance of general reading strategies, such as predicting, guessing the meaning of unknown words and phrases, recognising the relationships within sentences or between sentences, understanding the ways in which texts are organised, etc. This approach has been admirably described by Grellet (1981).

Closely linked to general reading strategies is the question of developing reading speed, and it is certainly the case that many people who are quite proficient in a foreign language still feel handicapped by inadequate reading speed. This is particularly true of foreign students coping with lengthy reading lists in the language of the country where they are studying, who often feel at a disadvantage compared with the native speakers studying alongside them. Fry's (1963) work on reading speed was quite influential in the field of EFL, while de Leeuw and de Leeuw (1965) have perhaps had a more general influence in mother tongue as well as foreign language reading. However, the emphasis in the last decade has been not so much on faster reading as on reading at the most appropriate speed. Faster reading techniques will certainly feature here, as it may often be better to read two or three texts with, say, 70% comprehension than one text with 95% comprehension (assuming that slower and more careful reading leads to greater comprehension, which may not necessarily be the case). However, there will be occasions when slower reading may be called for. Coady (1979) suggests that students should initially aim to increase reading speed so as later to have greater flexibility in rates of reading. Work in general reading strategies needs to sensitise learners to the need to read at the most appropriate speed, in addition to selecting all the other strategies to be employed with a particular text.

Conclusion

We have seen that reading in a foreign language is both a language problem and a reading problem, and that both of these problems can be solved or at least lessened by practice in reading. Reading for the purpose of language learning may not represent an authentic use of reading or an authentic response to the text (Widdowson 1976), but this does not invalidate it as an effective means of language learning. However, working on the

language problem alone will not solve the reading problem, and work on reading strategies will normally be necessary too. I have aimed to show how learners can work on both of these problems on their own, using a well stocked language resources centre, with occasional reference to other learners and / or to a language learning adviser. Reading does seem to lend itself particularly well to a self-directed learning approach, providing learners have access to an adequate range of texts and exercises, and in most cases it should be possible to build the necessary feedback into the learning materials, thus keeping the input of the language learning adviser to the minimum.

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